The internationalization of ideological conflict: Asia’s new significance

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Abstract  The idea of a clash of values between the ‘East’ and ‘West’ enjoys influence amongst academics, politicians, journalists and others interested in the implications of Asia’s changing position in the global political economy. However, false monoliths are being depicted in the notion of ‘Asian values’ versus ‘Western liberalism’ which conceal major and unresolved political and ideological disputes within Asia and the West. Indeed, it is the universality of these disputes which accounts for the extensive interest outside Asia in the idea of ‘Asian values’: in particular, the resonance of so-called ‘Asian values’ with conservative ideology and philosophy. Meanwhile, self-appointed custodians of ‘Asian values’ from the elite in Asia attempt to portray emerging challenges to conservative values, from a variety of competing political and ideological perspectives, as ‘unAsian’.

Keywords  Ideology; values; democratization; opposition; conservatism; culture.

Introduction

According to Samuel Huntington’s (1993) influential ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis, the end of the Cold War portends the rapid waning of ideological conflict around the globe, only to be replaced by new tensions between ‘the West’ and ‘the Rest’ which centre around cultural differences. Though the detail of this thesis has been contested by various political leaders and government officials in Asia, the essence of Huntington’s message nevertheless finds strong resonance in pronouncements about so-called ‘Asian values’ and the associated denunciation of ‘Western liberalism’ by many of

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the same people: a 'clash of cultures' if not 'civilizations'. But whilst the idea that Asians are culturally distinct has been a thematic rationale in resisting international pressures relating to human rights and labour conditions, the chief attraction amongst certain regional leaders in the notion of 'Asian values' is not so much international as domestic: its potential to marginalize views within Asia that pose some sort of challenge to authoritarian rule.

In the past, the spectre of communism or arguments about the primacy of initiating economic development have been drawn on to justify authoritarian rule and curtail political pluralism in much of Asia. However, economic development has resulted in social transformations manifesting in pressures for political pluralism. Yet this largely involves politically moderate forces with a strong stake in the consolidation and deepening of capitalism; these challenges to authoritarian rule cannot so easily be conflated with threats to economic progress and political stability. It is therefore no coincidence that the most strident assertions of 'Asian values' have come from regimes that have undergone least accommodation to the forces of political change. Nor is it a coincidence that these assertions have taken place in a context of increasing social and political differentiation between and within the various societies of Asia. Proclamations about 'Asian values' represent an attempt by elites to define away as 'alien' influences, derivative of 'Western culture', contending political and social perspectives which reject or question these values. The urgency and force with which 'Asian values' are expounded is thus a measure of the political insecurity, rather than confidence, of the remaining authoritarian leaderships in the region.

However, equally significant is the utility of rhetoric and arguments about 'Asian values' for politics outside the region. The contest over 'Asia', to identify its essential elements, is not confined to Asia or Asians. The lessons and implications of Asian economic success are rapidly assuming an important element of political debate around the world. In this, ideas about 'Asian values' are increasingly harnessed by a range of social and political forces, either to protect and advance commercial and political interests in Asia, or to bolster domestic reform agendas of a conservative or neo-liberal nature that are justified with reference to Asia. If there is any clash of cultures unfolding, then, it involves the internationalizing of long-standing disputes over political ideas. This development is both aided and masked by the idea of 'Asian values'. Although authoritarian Asian leaders and others subscribing to their line can point to dissenting views in Asia as indistinguishable from views in 'the West', this is equally true of so-called 'Asian values' and precisely why the debate has currency outside the region.

**Reviving 'Asian values' and limiting political pluralism**

It is not that long ago that theorists were documenting what they saw as the impediments to modernization presented by traditional cultures (see,
for example, Hoselitz 1966; Nash 1966; Hagen 1966), including ‘Asian values’. It is even more ironic that for some of these writers the very diversity of Asia in social, political and cultural terms was part of the problem. Accordingly, Ho (1977: 13), for example, argued that:

It is therefore more appropriate to use the term ‘Asian Values’ to denote not a particular set of attitudes, beliefs and institutions which all Asian people share in common, but rather to refer to the great diversities which characterise Asian values as such, and which in the context of this discussion, pose serious difficulties to the task of modernising Asia for social, economic and political development.

It was precisely this diversity which led John Steadman as early as 1969 to argue in The Myth of Asia that ‘The most obvious signs of unity in Asia are, paradoxically, those of Western influence’ (Steadman 1969: 44).

The contemporary focus on ‘Asian values’, however, not only attempts to distil essential cultural elements across the region, but puts a decidedly more favourable gloss on them. Thus we are told that such ‘Asian’ cultural characteristics as group orientation, the importance of the family, the propensity to adopt consensual decision-making processes and emphasis on education and saving have underscored political stability and economic development (Kahn 1979; Lee in Zakaria 1994; Mahathir and Shintaro 1995; Mahbubani 1994; Goh 1994; Koh 1993; Hofheinz and Calder 1982; Lodge and Vogel 1987; Berger and Hsiao 1990).1 Adherents to the ‘Asian values’ thesis both inside and outside the region have tended to characterize Confucianism as the cultural underlay to these particular values, raising questions about where the non-ethnic Chinese communities of the region fit in this schema. Significantly, the essentials of ‘Asian values’ have been defined principally in opposition to what is commonly referred to as ‘Western liberalism’ which is seen, amongst other things, to be characterized by excessive individualism and a propensity for protestation and open political conflict. The consistent reference to ‘Western liberalism’ conveys the clear message that liberalism is an ‘alien’ set of social and political values for which ‘real’ Asians have a cultural aversion.

The question for the moment, however, is how we explain this turn-around in the meaning and application of ‘Asian values’ since the heyday of modernization theory. The intervening decades have witnessed significant changes, including rapid economic development and a favourable repositioning of Asia within the global political economy. Projections of an ‘Asian century’ abound (see, for example, Naisbitt 1995; Rohwer 1995; Fallow 1994; Weiss 1989; Overholt 1993; Mahathir and Shintaro 1995).2 It is understandable that many people within the former colonies should derive pride from this, not least political leaders, and that greater institutionalization of economic and political relationships in the region should ensue. Notions of an ‘Asian renaissance’ and the recent establishment of
the Commission for a New Asia (1994) give vivid expression to this changing mood. But we should be careful to distinguish the shared experience and consciousness of late but spectacular industrialization from shared culture. Attempts to foster regional identity which promote the idea of cultural homogeneity will continue to confront a complex reality and invite observations like that of the former Japanese Ministry of Trade and Industry (MITI) official, Naohiro Amaya. According to him, “Asia” is a geographical word. Asian nations share nothing in common’ (as quoted in Jameson 1992: 1). Indeed, as Camroux (1996) has pointed out, the attempt to construct a sense of Asian community out of this diversity rests heavily on the spurious concept of an homogenous West to serve as both a foil and point of reference.

More important than any sense of collective pride or regional identity, the dramatic economic development in much of East and Southeast Asia since the 1960s has set in train social transformations involving new centres of economic and political power, as well as new divisions and conflicts. This has translated into new pressures on authoritarian rule, not just from emerging business and middle classes seeking the greater institutionalization of the rule of law, transparency in government and the curtailment of corruption, but also from organizations representing labour, women, environmentalists and social justice and human rights activists. Broadly speaking, there has been an upsurge of political opposition, but significantly without the sort of strategic influence of communists, socialists and radicals that has characterized previous historical phases of opposition (see Hewison and Rodan 1994). Certainly liberal democratic ideas feature prominently within the political philosophies and aspirations of these social forces, although they are one element of a wider complex.

The popular and unproblematic depiction of Asia’s emerging middle classes as a pre-eminent force for ‘democracy’ downplays this complexity at the same time as it conceals the ambiguity of the political positions of the middle classes domestically and across the region. What is crucially important is that, whether this involves advocacy of liberal democracy or not, these social forces have agitated for the right to influence public policy and that has generally required some sort of reassessment of state–society relations by authoritarian leaders (see Rodan 1996).

The complexion and strength of these pressures have obviously varied throughout East and Southeast Asia, as have the responses by authoritarian regimes facing such challenges. Thus, throughout the region we have witnessed a differential mix, importance and character to political parties, social movements, non-government organizations (NGOs) and organizations co-opted into some sort of political relationship with the state. We can expect the contrasting mixes in the forms and substances of these political oppositions in each society to produce even more divergent political trajectories as capitalist industrialization consolidates and reflects local constellations of social and economic power.
A major distinction is likely to be drawn, however, between societies in which changes in state–society relations permit significantly greater independent political space – where civil societies expand – and those where more extensive and ingenious forms of political co-option are devised. Clearly developments in Taiwan, South Korea and to a lesser extent Hong Kong have been much more facilitative of independent political spaces than Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, for example. In the former, interest groups representing labour, business and professionals, together with an assortment of social movements and NGOs are playing an increasingly active political role, in some respects surpassing political parties. By contrast, in the latter, what concessions have been made to political pluralism have often involved extensions to state structures themselves. This has taken quite elaborate form in Singapore to selectively sanction wider consultation with elements of the business and middle classes. Here the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) is attempting to shore up elitism at the same time as it widens the incorporation of social forces into state structures (see Rodan 1992). But in Indonesia, recent labour strikes, as well as public demonstrations over press bans, serve as a reminder that, outside the city–state, the viability of corporatism is likely to be more fully tested.

Since the 1980s, the fortunes of authoritarian regimes have certainly suffered in the region, starting with the collapse of the Marcos regime in the Philippines and followed by the fall of military and civilian dictatorships in South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand. Significantly, all of these developments included strong support from broad sections of the middle and business classes. Events in 1989, culminating in the Tiananmen Square massacre, also underlined the more than residual opposition to authoritarian rule in China. Then, following 28 years of military dictatorship, in 1990 the National League for Democracy (NLD) had a landslide electoral victory in Burma. Despite tight controls on campaigning and the house arrest ten months earlier of its leaders, the NLD picked up 392 out of 485 seats while the pro-military National Unity Party won just ten seats. While the military prevented the elected leaders from taking office, this was another powerful rebuff for the idea that Asians have some cultural predisposition towards ‘strong government’. Meanwhile, and in defiance of Chinese authorities preparing to regain sovereignty in mid-1997, elections in 1991 and 1995 in Hong Kong also appear to have whetted an appetite for greater political representation. The Taiwanese electorate was similarly defiant in its first democratic presidential elections in March 1996. Despite attempted military intimidation involving missile and war games by Chinese authorities on the eve of the poll, a 76 per cent voter turnout resulted in a landslide victory for Lee Teng-hui – the very candidate the Chinese had hoped the military exercise would dissuade the Taiwanese from identifying with.

In these circumstances, it is understandable that authoritarian leaderships remaining in the region might feel a little nervous about the patterns
of change around them and anxious to dissuade their own populations from emulating any of these experiences. For Singapore's leaders, anxiety levels would only have been exacerbated by the international currency enjoyed within academic, policy and journalistic circles of a revised modernization theory proposition linking economic development with political liberalization. After all, Singapore's industrial and economic development lags only behind Japan in the region.

Not coincidentally, in his 1994 national day speech, the prime minister, Goh Chok Tong made negative observations about Taiwan's political direction which he noted, like South Korea's, had attracted praise in the Western media (see Goh 1994: 421–2). Similarly, Lee Kuan Yew has depicted approval in American media of democratization and press freedom in Taiwan, South Korea, the Philippines and Thailand as an assertion of American cultural supremacy because 'their' ideas are being adopted in these countries. He warns that 'their ideas are theories, theories not proven, not proven in East Asia, not even in the Philippines after they had governed for 50 years' (Lee 1995: 12). In late 1995, the official PAP organ, Petir, also published a five-point strategy in preparation for the next general election. The fifth point called on the party faithful to: 'be ready to cite negative examples of other countries which show that Singapore is on the right track. These include South Korea, Thailand and Taiwan (democracy) and France, Italy and New Zealand (welfarism)' (Goh 1995: 5).

**Beyond elite culture in Asia**

The attempt to articulate 'Asian values' has relied heavily on liberalism as a point of departure and has been light on specifying the positive, definitive characteristics of 'Asian culture' that are purported to permeate social and political organizations in the region. This is not so surprising, given that the region is comprised of a series of adapted systems fundamentally shaped by liberal democratic and communist ideas. Any attempt to identify the 'consensual Asian' form of government runs into this problem (Mallett 1994: xxvi). The difficulty is compounded by the fact that the region's most vocal and influential proponents of 'Asian values' have had to embark on something of a cultural rediscovery themselves to address this issue. It is ironic that Singapore's mostly Western-educated elite are at the pivot of the campaign for 'Asian values'. Apart from Lee, this includes Goh Chok Tong, Kishore Mahbubani, Chan Heng Chee, Tommy Koh, George Yeo and Bilahari Kausikan. In the 1980s, when the PAP government decided to introduce Confucianism into the secondary education syllabus, this was only possible with the help of outside experts. The atmosphere has certainly changed. During the 1960s and 1970s, when the opposition Barisan Sosialis had significant support amongst those educated in the Chinese-language medium, the PAP was particularly vigilant against
anything roughly approximating Chinese chauvinism (see Bloodworth 1986).

To the extent that ‘Asian values’ have been appropriated in reaction to the perceived threat of liberalism, the absence of real definition to the alternative Asian model is not a fundamental problem. Indeed, from a political point of view it is paramount that the notion be retained at as abstract and vague a level as possible. Nevertheless, this does produce some interesting ambiguities and contradictions. Take for instance Lee Kuan Yew’s position on the liberal democratic notion of the separation of powers. This is one of the fundamental ingredients of liberal democracy, but not one ever claimed as central to ‘Asian values’. Indeed, recently the mayor of Seoul, Dr Cho Soon, argued that the traditional absence of this concept in Asia necessarily meant that the development of democracy in the region could not replicate Western experience (see the Australian 15 November 1995: 15). Yet, as international newspaper proprietors have discovered to their considerable cost, nothing is more likely to provoke the authorities in Singapore than to cast doubts on the independence of the judiciary from the executive. If you reject liberalism, why such extreme sensitivity to this sort of observation? Surely there are a host of plausible political arguments for not placing paramount importance on the separation of powers if you feel no compunction to defend liberalism and are confident about a defensible political alternative.

This uncertainty about what actually constitutes the ‘Asian alternative’ underlines that the principal dynamic behind the revival of ‘Asian values’ by authoritarian leaders is to negate the perceived appeal of liberalism within Asia. Not surprisingly, then, these leaders find themselves not just at odds with other Asians who reject the attempt to depict their views as ‘alien’, but also with those who take seriously the question of how cultural heritages in Asia shape contemporary possibilities. In a recent lecture in Singapore, Professor Tu Wei-ming of Harvard University, one of those experts who had earlier been consulted on Confucianism, raised very serious doubts even about the validity of Confucianism as the basis of a critique of ‘the West’. To be relevant today, Tu argues, Confucian tradition needs to be creatively transformed by some of the values of the European Enlightenment, including human rights, freedom, liberty and due process of law. If this can be achieved, without sacrificing such spiritual resources as family cohesion and respect for elders, then Tu believes Confucianists would then, and only then, have earned ‘the right and responsibility to be critical of excessive individualism, litigiousness and social disintegration’ (as quoted in the Straits Times 22 March 1995: 22).

A more direct refutation of the attempt to harness Confucianism and Asian cultural traditions to an attack on liberalism has been undertaken by other Asian political figures. Indeed, a former presidential candidate and leading dissident and human rights campaigner in South Korea, Kim Dae Jung, has turned the argument on its head. In an explicit response
to Lee Kuan Yew’s published views in the American journal *Foreign Affairs* (Zakaria 1994), Kim argues that democracy has deep roots in Asian cultures and philosophies, including the works of Confucius, Lao-tzu and Mencius. In China and Korea, a country prefecture system had been in place for 2,000 years when Western societies were still being ruled by feudal lords. Far from Asia’s cultural traditions obstructing liberal democracy, Kim maintains they contain the intellectual and ideological bases for a major contribution to a new ‘global democracy’ (Kim 1994, 1995).

Kim’s high profile, like that of President Ramos of the Philippines who has also clashed with Lee Kuan Yew over the latter’s anti-democratic prescriptions for the region (see *Far Eastern Economic Review* 10 December 1992: 29) and Hong Kong human rights campaigner and Legislative Councilor Christine Loh (1993), gives these intra-Asian disputations a certain visibility. However, there also exists a range of other oppositions within Asia to the ‘Asian values’ thesis. Take, for example, the issue of human rights. The position adopted by Asian governments in the Bangkok Declaration in March 1993, prior to the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights, emphasized the importance of historical, cultural and regional specificities in the interpretation of human rights (see Freeman 1995). This amounted to a serious qualification to the idea of human rights as universal, and included arguments about the importance of social stability and economic development rather than abstract individual freedoms as the primary basis of gauging human rights. The message was clear: the West should not try to impose its culturally-specific standards on other countries.

Regional NGOs responded immediately to re-assert the universality of human rights across cultures (see Ghai 1995: 63; Muntarbhorn 1993). In July the following year, and despite the efforts of Thai authorities to jettison the gathering (see *Thai Development News* No. 25, 1994: 68–70), the Southeast Asian NGOs’ Forum on Human Rights and Development in Bangkok issued a further statement which extended the challenge to regional governments on human rights. The statement included condemnation of the repressive State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in Burma and the occupation of East Timor by Indonesian authorities. Moreover, while these NGOs accepted the importance of linking human rights with social and economic rights, as the ASEAN governments had earlier insisted, they drew on this principle to call for more equitable distribution of income, environmentally-sustainable development, and the removal of gender discrimination. Clearly, within the region there are individuals and groups who see a case for critically evaluating the liberal concept of human rights, but as a basis for social and economic reform agendas which few authoritarian regimes would welcome. Indeed, as Ghai (1995: 64–5) has argued, the sensitivity of authorities in Asia to debate over human rights is grounded in concern about the potential of this to question the structures of power and
authority embedded in material disparities, corruption, the influence of international capital and other objects of popular animosity.

The reaction to the inaugural summit of Asian and European leaders in Bangkok in March 1996 further underlined this regional diversity of social and political philosophies. The Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) was particularly intended to forge stronger economic ties between the two regions. However, European Union leaders had as late as December 1995 supported the idea of incorporating ‘open and wide-ranging’ dialogue at the summit, including the possibility of co-operation on the promotion of democracy, human rights and rule by law. Yet subsequently, European leaders publicly declared their intention to steer clear of sensitive issues and not to allow disagreements over human rights and labour standards to get in the way of a harmonious outcome. The calculation appeared in no small part to be that European economic interests might otherwise be jeopardized, and concern that European countries needed to quickly extend investment and trade links with Asia.9 Thus, as anticipated, the ASEM concentrated on economic issues and simply reaffirmed a commitment to the United Nations Charter and the Conventions on Human Rights. Divisive questions like child labour, women’s rights, deforestation, pollution, civil liberties and East Timor were publicly avoided.

Yet these sorts of issues, which concerned the connections between economic, social and political development, were the main focus of a three-day parallel conference involving some thirty NGOs held in Bangkok to contest the expected direction of ASEM. Entitled Beyond Geopolitics and Geoeconomics: Towards a New Relationship Between Asia and Europe, this meeting gave expression to an array of perspectives from Asian organizations, most of which again contrasted sharply with the economistic and instrumentalist views of Asian leaders. Among the Asian NGOs involved were groups representing workers, farmers, women, environmentalists, social justice activists, advocates of disarmament and opponents of child prostitution.

The attempt by authoritarian leaders in Asia, then, to dismiss dissenting views on human rights on the basis that they simply echo mainstream ‘Western liberal’ opinion simply does not hold up to scrutiny. Liberalism is a significant political force in the region and, as the formation in 1994 of both the Forum of Democratic Leaders in the Asia Pacific (FDL–AP) and the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD) illustrates,10 it has the potential to assume more formal networks across the region. However, other challenges to authoritarian rule exist, inspired by notions of democracy and development that go beyond liberal individualism. Various developmental NGOs throughout much of Asia involve efforts to promote participatory democracy (see Clark 1991; Hewison 1993; Eldridge 1995). In the endeavour to sustain local communities, economic and political decentralization is a priority for many in Asia. As Callahan (1994)
points out, there are grassroots alternatives to the notions of ‘Asian democracy’ propagated by elites which draw on local knowledge and traditions in Asia.

Illustrating this point, Aung San Suu Kyi – one of Asia’s most popular political figures – insists that democracy takes a variety of forms and should not simply be equated with one dominant form. Indeed, even in the West the forms vary significantly, and we should expect the same in Asia. However, this cannot be used to justify authoritarian rule. Rather, ‘People’s participation in social and political transformation is the central issue of our time’ (Aung 1994). Moreover, Aung’s critique of what Lee Kuan Yew and other proponents of ‘Asian values’ would regard as ‘Western decadence’ is seen in very different terms:

Many of the worst ills of American society, increasingly to be found in other developed countries, can be traced not to the democratic legacy but to the demands of modern materialism. Gross individualism and cut-throat morality arise when political and intellectual freedoms are curbed on the one hand while on the other fierce economic competitiveness is encouraged by making material success the measure of prestige and progress.

(Aung 1994)

Such a critique has obvious relevance for much of Asia where economic individualism generally faces less constraints than in established liberal democracies in which environmental groups and others exert a greater influence to protect wider community interests. The philosophical contrast between Aung and Lee is a dramatic but nevertheless poignant reminder of the diversity that the ‘Asian values’ generalizations obscure. Such authentic expressions of Asian opinion obviously pose a special problem for the credibility of ‘Asian values’.

The point of the above is not to establish the ‘real’ Asian values but instead to emphasize there are a number of different political voices in Asia. The advocates of the ‘Asian values’ thesis are correct in claiming connections between the ideas within Asia that reject this thesis and ideas within the West. But this is no less true of the ideas encapsulated in ‘Asian values’. The views championed by advocates of ‘Asian values’ are not an ‘Asian alternative’ to ‘Western liberalism’ but an ‘alternative in Asia’ to liberalism. As will be explained below, the same attacks on liberalism can be found in the West itself.

‘Western’ support for ‘Asian values’

Of no less importance in this ‘Asian values’ rhetoric is the depiction of liberalism as absolutely and equally ascendant throughout ‘the West’. Yet behind this convenient monolith, there are considerable differences in the
constellation and strength of political forces and ideas from America to Europe, for example, which pose varying domestic challenges to liberalism and incite serious debates over the nature of liberalism itself among its supporters. At their core, these challenges and debates centre around the fundamental and unresolved disputes over the relative rights and responsibilities of individuals and the state: precisely the same set of questions underlying political and ideological contestation in Asia today and embodied in the content of ‘Asian values’. It is the linking up of ideological forces across ‘East’ and ‘West’ in the prosecution of positions taken in these fundamental disputes, not a clash of cultures, which is unfolding. Critical in this is an amalgam of conservative and neo-liberal forces seeking, in the West, to reverse a range of social and political reforms of the post-Second World War period that resulted from certain social democratic and liberal pressures.

Within liberalism there are significant tensions, notably between the advocates of a more laissez-faire economic individualism, popularly referred to as neo-liberals or ‘dries’, and the ‘wets’ who sanction a more interventionist social and economic role for the state to elevate the individual or ensure fair competition between individuals. The latter are chief amongst the targets of attacks by Lee Kuan Yew et al. on ‘Western liberalism’. The former’s conception of liberty is an acutely class-specific one which privileges and champions the liberties of enterprising individuals with capital rather than individuals in general. Yet neo-liberals have their differences with conservatives. They lack the conservative reverence for tradition, favouring instead reason and rationality as a guide to political practice and policy. They have a far greater tolerance for the incursions of the market economy on social life, shying away from moral insistence on censorship, for example.

The important intersection that brings various neo-liberals and conservatives together is the attraction for the market system in imposing discipline on individuals and generating an hierarchical order of winners and losers. Neither are comfortable with the assertion of social and political rights – either because of their threat to market principles or challenge of authority. Understandably, then, both conservatives and liberals share a deep scepticism about independent trade union power which is perceived as a threat to both capital and authority. Similarly, conservatives share the neo-liberal desire for a rationalization of the state’s role, though not to free market forces for the sake of it, but to reassert the authority of traditional institutions like the family ahead of the welfare system, for example.

The integration of Asia into domestic ideological and political battles in the established liberal democracies has gathered momentum as the economic fortunes of the former increasingly stand in sharp contrast with those of the latter. As a host of policymakers and academics come to the conclusion that the competitiveness of the ‘Asia model’ simply compels
some pragmatic adjustments in 'the West' neo-liberals and conservatives have ready-made solutions which resonate with various 'Asian values'. Moreover, 'Asian values' provide a tempting rationale for governments and their bureaucrats, anxious to extend economic relations with Asia, moderating public positions on human rights to avoid diplomatic friction (see Awanohara 1993: 13; Malan 1994: 11). The recent ASEM referred to above is ample testimony to this. Academics with specialist knowledge about Asian cultures might also feel empowered by the opportunity to 'unlock the mysteries of the East' that this debate presents. And there are assorted radicals whose animosity towards imperialism leads them also to sympathize with attacks on 'the West' (see Robison 1993). So there are a variety of seductions in 'Asian values' outside the region.

This harnessing of the 'Asian values' debate to domestic politics has been quite explicit in Australia where, for the last decade, economic restructuring has been closely tied to the idea of greater economic relations with Asia. A variety of politicians, journalists, business leaders, academics, judges and other prominent figures have weighed in with recommendations on how Australian society needs to be reformed in response to, or emulation of, Asian development (see Rodan and Hewison 1996). Increasingly, the same process is reflected in the United States, Britain and Europe. Recently, in Britain the chairman of the House of Commons' Foreign Affairs Committee, the Conservative Party's David Howell, gave one of the most direct and comprehensive such statements in alerting Europeans to imminent 'Easternization'. According to Howell (1995: 11), this is 'not just about adopting the business techniques of those now in the ascendant, the Asian dynamos, but about some of the values and attitudes which lie beneath their success both as economies and societies'. Not surprisingly, this leads amongst other things to the endorsement of 'the greater security which flows from families and neighbourhoods' (ibid.: 11) ahead of the welfare state. The British prime minister, John Major, has also cast his eyes east, talking about Britain becoming the enterprise centre of Europe by drawing on the success of the 'Asian tigers'. That success, as the Conservatives see it, stems from low taxes and deregulated markets (see The Independent 4 January 1996: 11; The Financial Times 10 January 1996: 6).

British Labour leader, Tony Blair, has drawn differently on the Asian experience in an attempt to legitimize or bolster his political prescriptions for Britain. For him, the real lesson of the Asian experience resides in the parallel achievements of economic success and social cohesion. This has not happened by laissez-faire regimes, but responsible state policies to assist economic development and harness it to social ends. However, Blair attempts to distinguish this from 'old style intervention'. He emphasizes the importance of technocratic competence in government and the concept of the 'stakeholder society', with Singapore singled out as the best illustration. According to Blair, government investment in social and
physical infrastructure in Singapore not only assists business, it also creates opportunities for the workforce and is complemented by social policies in areas like public housing and compulsory superannuation to further spread the benefits of growth – generalizing the ‘stake’ in economic growth (The Financial Times 10 January 1996: 6; The Guardian 6 January 1996: 24).

Within Britain, Blair’s portrayal of Singapore has been challenged as an idealization and is interpreted by some as an attempt to justify moving away from universal welfare (The Scotsman 8 January 1996: 11). It has been pointed out that the much-touted compulsory superannuation scheme in Singapore, the Central Provident Fund (CPF), is funded directly by individuals and employers, even if controlled by the government, and certainly does not involve wealth redistribution. The right-wing Adam Smith Institute has also welcomed the prospect of reforming the British welfare state along the lines of the Singapore model (The Independent 5 January 1996: 13). Blair’s version of the Singapore model has a special significance for his attempt to transform the British Labour Party and its image, attempting to identify the party more closely with business without abandoning the rhetoric of social justice.

Sensing a similar political climate on the Continent, Ralph Dahrendorf (1995) has cautioned Europeans against the temptation to flirt with the ‘Asian model’ of economic growth with social authoritarianism. However, those in the West seeking to resist such a model should, in the process, be wary not to reinforce the notion that Asians actually have a cultural predisposition for authoritarianism. The main purpose in what follows is to expose the universality of the sorts of ideas that are masqueraded as ‘Asian values’ and to argue that what is at work here is an ideological discourse of a fundamental nature.

Conservatism and ‘Asian values’

The following discussion concentrates on the correspondence between ‘Asian values’ and the philosophies and agendas of conservatives in the West who seek the restoration of what they identify as traditional values in their own societies. This will be pursued under the following headings which represent very selective but nevertheless central and universal characteristics of conservatism: human nature, discipline and order; and traditional values. In taking this approach, it is not suggested that the entire perspective of the selected leaders espousing ‘Asian values’ can be understood solely in terms of conservative theory and philosophy. Nor is it suggested that all of the conservatives mentioned are friends of Asia or Asians. There are few political actors anywhere who do not fuse different, and often contradictory, ideological elements. However, the following is intended to illustrate important ideological convergences across the alleged East–West conceptual divide, offering some insight into
why there are attempts in the established liberal democratic societies to incorporate the 'Asian values' debate at home.

The survey of ideas by Asian leaders is necessarily limited rather than comprehensive, and draws heavily on statements by the activist Singaporean leaders. Singaporeans have certainly played a disproportionately large role in declarations about 'Asian values', especially in the international arena (see George 1994; Hitchcock 1994; Emmerson 1995). At the same time, it should be emphasized that there are any number of similar examples which could be drawn from, inter alia, Indonesia, Thailand, China, Vietnam, Malaysia and Burma. The discussion also draws mainly but not exclusively on examples from Australia to demonstrate the general point about contemporary ideological convergences with these Asian leaders. Again, if space permitted, the analysis could be extended to incorporate wider evidence.

**Human nature, discipline and order**

Conservatives have a fundamentally negative view of human nature, seeing humans as imperfect and requiring control (O'Sullivan 1976: 14–15). Whereas Rousseau saw humans as inherently free and good, conservatives understand humans as naturally evil and prone to anarchy and destruction. Hence, a conservative writer, Russell Kirk (1978: 8), underlines how the force of tradition acts as a check on the 'anarchic impulse' of human beings. The imperfect nature of humans necessitates controls, and Peter Viereck (1978: 32) writes about 'self-expression through self-restraint'.

The theme of discipline is strong in the attempts by Asian leaders to differentiate so-called Asian values from those of Western societies. In an ironic statement from the former prime minister of possibly the world's most socially-engineered society, Lee Kuan Yew stated in an interview with the editor of the American *Foreign Affairs* that:

> There is such a thing called evil, and it is not the result of being a victim of society. You are just an evil man, prone to do evil things, and you have to be stopped from doing them. Westerners have abandoned an ethical basis for society, believing all problems are solvable by good government, which we in the East never believed possible.

(quoted in Zakaria 1994: 112)

Kishore Mahbubani (1994: 9), permanent secretary in Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, links 'East Asian discipline' with economic performance, stating that 'the evidence is accumulating that socially cohesive and disciplined societies are developing a competitive edge in today's world'. The Malaysian prime minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, has also recently talked about the importance for Malaysia of a 'culture of

In Singapore, in his 1994 National Day speech, Goh Chok Tong extended this theme, decrying what he regards as the light treatment meted out to criminals in the United States and Britain. Echoing the criticisms of conservatives in these countries, he contended that some judges there show more sympathy for the offender than the victim. His intention was to hammer home the point that Singapore’s authorities would continue to impose discipline and not shy from this responsibility. The alternative was social chaos and breakdown, which was now manifesting in the West (Goh 1994).

This was a timely observation given that Singapore and the US officials had, in previous months, been exchanging views over the sentence of an American teenager living in Singapore, Michael Fay, who had been convicted by a Singapore court on charges of vandalism. Sentenced to four months in jail, a $2,200 fine and six strokes of the cane, Fay ultimately had his caning reduced to four strokes as a limited gesture to the American government which had actually appealed for clemency. Bill Clinton had referred to the punishment as ‘excessive’ and charges of barbarism were invariably levelled by human rights advocates and individual commentators in the United States and elsewhere. In the United States, a \textit{Christian Science Monitor} editorial maintained, ‘It is not going too far to say that the caning of Fay is almost a literal expression of what Samuel Huntington has called an “emerging clash of civilisations”’ (quoted in \textit{STWE} 23 April 1994: 13). Lee Kuan Yew took the opportunity to claim the Fay affair evidenced America’s moral decay: ‘The [US] dares not restrain or punish individuals, forgiving them for whatever they have done. That’s why the whole country is in chaos: drugs, violence, unemployment and homelessness’ (quoted in \textit{Asiaweek} 25 May 1994: 38).

However, the reaction within the West to incidents such as the Fay caning actually demonstrates that the Singapore government’s preference for a tough stance on law and order is by no means culturally-based. Rather, like-minded conservatives in the West with the same basic mistrust of human nature were amongst the strongest supporters of the Singapore government’s stances \(\textit{(STWE} 23 April 1994: 13; Lal 1994)\). In Australia, for example, a Queensland National Party Member of Parliament not only applauded the Singapore system but called for the adoption of flogging in Australia.\(^{12}\) A Western Australian Member of the Legislative Council has also subsequently urged the adoption of the rattan to punish young criminals, citing Singapore as proof of its effectiveness in curbing crime \(\textit{(Subiaco Post} 12 March 1996: 18)\). Amidst the Fay controversy, the Western Australian premier, Richard Court, visited Singapore and on his return publicly embraced the re-introduction of the death penalty in his state \(\textit{(West Australian} 18 March 1994: 9)\). He spoke admiringly about the achievements of Singapore’s authorities: ‘They have entrenched a highly disciplined
approach to law and order issues where everyone clearly knows the ground rules'. He continued to remark ‘there is no doubt that the discipline at a younger age has helped instil a strong sense of responsibility and pride in their country' (quoted in *West Australian* 18 March 1994: 9). His attorney-general, Cheryl Edwardes, also visited a Singapore Reformation Working Centre, in her search for a model for discipline-oriented work camps for young offenders (*Sunday Times* [Perth] 31 July 1994: 23).

We should also keep in mind that the notion of crime as a fundamentally behavioural, rather than social, phenomenon informs much of the push in the United States for expanded expenditure on prisons. Clearly the punitive and disciplinarian approach to law and order in Singapore evokes significant support and respect in the West, with key public figures believing at least some elements worthy of recommendation. Interestingly, even Singaporeans are beginning to feel the criticism of this kind of approach from other Asian commentators, including from those who feel that crime is not a reflection of the inherent evil of people (see Tan 1994).

The conservative views on human nature and the need for discipline are linked to the preference for order. The primacy of order marks conservatives off from liberals who champion individual freedom and socialists and social democrats who are inspired by notions of social justice. Conservatives believe that without order and stability there can be no liberty or civilization. Instead, to quote Hobbes (in Scruton 1984: 73), life would be ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short’. Lee Kuan Yew's observations on contemporary American social life reflect this view:

I find parts of it totally unacceptable: guns, drugs, violent crime, vagrancy, unbecoming behaviour in public – in sum the breakdown of civil society. The expansion of the right of the individual to behave or misbehave as he pleases has come at the expense of orderly society. In the East the main object is to have a well-ordered society so that everybody can have maximum enjoyment of his freedoms. This can only exist in an ordered state and not in a natural state of contention and anarchy.

(quoted in Zakaria 1994: 111)

This quote was also reproduced approvingly by an Australian conservative columnist, B.A. Santamaria, in an article entitled ‘US decadence in a festering time’ (*Weekend Australian* 23–4 April 1994: 24).

Given their negative view of human nature, it is no wonder conservatives should place great store in order and fear imminent disaster in the event that it should break down. This theme emerges in Mahbubani's (1994: 11) reservations about the direction of American society. He argues that:

American society, by permitting all forms of lifestyle to emerge – without any social pressures to conform to certain standards – may
have wrecked the moral and social fabric that is needed to keep a society calm and well ordered. A well-ordered society needs to plant clear constraints on behaviour in the minds of its citizens. In the United States it is clear that many such fundamental psychological constraints have collapsed, with the acceptance of all forms of lifestyle as legitimate.

Here Mahbubani is not only expressing concern about the collapse of order, but attributing it to the absence of a clear and unambiguous moral stance in defence of a particular order. Despite the general reverence for order by its advocates, it is not a case of any order will do. Rather, an hierarchical order with clear lines of dominance and subordination and undisputed authority is mutually attractive to Western conservatives and Asian leaders championing the East Asian way. Thus, conservatives have historically looked to the institutions of family, church and nation rather than representative political institutions.

**Traditional values**

Whilst the discipline of market relations is attractive to conservatives, they have always had reservations about capitalism, insisting that there be a moral basis to the social and political order which transcends mere market logic (O'Sullivan 1976; Viereck 1962; O’Gorman 1986). American Irving Kristol’s (1978) *Two Cheers for Capitalism* is but the most striking contemporary reminder of this. Asian conservatives have also stressed the importance of non-economic factors and the alleged centrality of traditional Asian values. Singapore’s prime minister argues that a sense of community and nationhood, a disciplined and hardworking people, strong moral values, and family ties are the critical Asian values: ‘These values are tried and tested, have held us together, propelled us forward. We must keep them as the bedrock of our society for the next century’. He continued: ‘It is not simply materialism and pursuit of individual rewards which drive Singapore forward, but more important is the sense of idealism and service, born out of a feeling of social solidarity and national identification’ (Goh 1994: 422). This call for an emphasis on Asian values is based on a fear that they ‘are giving way to a more Westernised, individualistic, and self-centred outlook on life’ (quoted in *Shared Values* 1991: 1).

As is so often the case with Western conservative critics of their own societies, Goh emphasizes the centrality of traditional family structures and values. When conservatives extol the virtues of the family, it is the patriarchal family they have in mind (see Stavropoulous 1990; Chipman 1986). This institution has a number of attractions for them. First, it embodies a clear power structure which is hierarchical and based on authority. The sexual division of labour and relations between parents and
children are not based on egalitarian principles but tradition and the utility of those relations to order – both within the family and the society more generally. Second, it is a pivotal institution for socialization – hence the common notion that the family is the building block of society (Nisbet 1986: 37; Heywood 1992: 62–3). In particular, it engenders a sense of obligation and commitment to a broader community. This is one of the reasons conservatives are often hostile to state-provided social welfare – it undermines the authority of family and community (Nisbet 1986: 58–9; Scruton 1991: 21). Lee Kuan Yew is certainly in agreement with this, although he seems to claim it as a distinctively Asian view:

Eastern societies believe that the individual exists in the context of his family. He is not pristine and separate. The family is part of the extended family, and then friends and the wider society. The ruler or the government does not try to provide for a person what the family best provides.

(cited in Zakaria 1994: 113)

Such views of the family allow for attacks on supposedly negative trends in society, pointing to the erosion of parental authority and discipline over children and the lack of respect for elders. Such statements are as common in the West as they are in the East, with Goh recently expressing concern that divorce rates are rising in Singapore and that there are indeed some single parents and juvenile delinquency in the island state (Australian 12 September 1994: 12). Goh’s general concerns were echoed and extended by the Malaysian prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, in his claim that the Western concept of a family is a clear indication of its moral decline. He condemned the West for recognition of a gay or lesbian couple as a family if it adopted children, and for recognition of de facto relationships as family units. ‘It will only produce illegitimate children who may, in turn, have incestuous marriages with their siblings’ (West Australian 16 August 1994: 20).

Coincidentally, at about the same time, the governor of Western Australia, Major General Michael Jeffrey, delivered a speech in Perth which expressed similar concerns about divorce rates and the growth of single-parent families (Jeffrey 1994). Governor Jeffrey claimed that a ‘British study found a direct statistical link between single parenthood and virtually every major type of crime’ (quoted in West Australian 19 August 1994: 31). Similarly, the Australian Broadcasting Commission’s televising of Sydney’s Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in 1994 brought a variety of group and individual protests, calling for the promotion of the ‘traditional’ family, while the Lyons Forum, a group within the Federal Liberal Party, maintained that only traditional families bonded by ‘God-ordained’ principles could bring up children properly (Canberra Times 4 March 1994: 1)
Significantly, moral and social conservatives in the West and the East
tend not to examine the structural bases of pressures on traditional values
carefully. If they did, what they would discover is that the market economy
plays a crucial role in this, particularly in the breakdown of the extended
family. Traditional, self-sufficient communities are transformed under
capitalism with its emphasis on consumerism and the rendering of as
much of social and cultural life to market relations as is possible. This is
where the ultimate contradiction between neo-liberalism and conservativism
resides.

Conclusion

The notion that cultural clashes between West and East will either
supplant, or increasingly underlie, ideological tensions in the international
arena is misleading. On the contrary, ideological differences are being
asserted across the globe with no less veracity than in the past, but more
often these days through discourses about culture. The cold war may have
ended, but this has simply released ideological and political energy: it has
not dissipated it. For authoritarian leaders in Asia, the new climate
has necessitated a different rationale for keeping dissenting voices at bay.
For neo-liberals and conservatives in the established liberal democracies,
the task is now to extend the principles of the market or shore up tradi-
tional values – in either case involving an attempt to shape social and
political order in these societies. These different projects – one defensive,
the other offensive – nevertheless draw on a similar reservoir of ideas.
Indeed, the respective domestic political and ideological contestations
inside and outside Asia are becoming integrated far more than at any
previous stage.

This argument is quite distinct from the emerging idea that the world
is heading down a path of convergence of values between East and West
– whether because of the imperatives of economic competition, geo-
political realities associated with Asia’s changing economic importance or
a more enlightened international community ensuing from globalization.
Since the sharp East–West cultural dichotomy is an invalid one, we should
be careful just what values are advanced in the name of this seemingly
noble convergence – especially where it is premised on the argument that
up until now it has been ‘the West’s’ ideas that have largely prevailed
around the globe and now it is time to learn from ‘the East’ (see
Mahbubani 1995). Under this pretext, a host of social and political reforms
in established liberal democratic societies could be reversed, but not in
the service of some general elevation of the positions of Asians. Rather,
such a combined attack on liberalism and social democracy could simul-
taneously dampen the aspirations of many within Asia for various forms
of social and political change that threaten authoritarian rule.
Notes

1 The absence of saving was one of the factors modernization theorists had earlier attributed to ‘Asian values’ and cited as a significant obstacle to economic development.

2 See Krugman (1994) for a contrary interpretation of Asian industrialization. For a succinct encapsulation of the other counter-arguments see Hicks (1995).

3 Hitchcock’s (1994) surveys of attitudes in the region reveal some similarly sceptical views about the prospects for pan-Asian identity.

4 The president was previously chosen indirectly by a national assembly dominated by mainlanders who fled with Chiang Kai-shek to Taiwan in 1949 but still claimed to represent constituencies in China.

5 For a statement denouncing criticism of human rights abuses in Asia for not appreciating cultural factors see Kausikan (1993).

6 A similar point was made in the first round of the ‘Asian values’ debate in reaction to American assertions of democracy as culturally alien to Asians. At a 1956 conference entitled Human Values in Social Change in South and Southeast Asia and in the United States ... Implications for Asian American Cooperation, an Indian delegate, Dr V.K.R.V. Rao, made the following observation: ‘Values Westerners claim as indigenous are really the product of the last 250 years of technological revolution, when you were free and we were not. Concepts like freedom, justice, equality, political democracy expressed in English literature and spreading like wildfire since the American, French and Russian Revolutions have become part of our value system ... But it should not be forgotten that thousands of years ago my ancestors, in great Hindu epics such as the Vedas and Upanishads, proclaimed the dignity of the individual. Many of America’s greatest values come not from Greece, Rome or England but from the East’ (as quoted in Goodfriend 1957: 10).

7 This visibility is on occasions quite selective within Asia, though. When the full text of Lee Kuan Yew’s Foreign Affairs article was reproduced in the Singapore press, absolutely no mention was made of the Kim article and at no subsequent time has it been reproduced for Singaporean readers.

8 The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (Forum-Asia) is a Bangkok-based network of twenty Asian human rights groups.

9 European Union countries directed less than 1 per cent of their foreign investment to Asia between 1982 and 1992. The European contribution to investment in Asia was just 10 per cent of the total inward foreign investment in that period (Irish Times 28 February 1996 as reproduced on the Irish Times World Wide Web page [http://www.irishtimes.com/irishtimes/paper] 28 February 1996).

10 Both Kim Dae Jung and Cory Aquino were instrumental in the idea of the FDL-AP which was established under the auspices of the Kim Dae Jung Peace Foundation. It initially met in Seoul in December 1994, with 1,500 people in attendance – including 150 former presidents, prime ministers and other dignitaries. At the meeting, it was proposed that liaison offices be set up in twelve countries and be headed by incumbent lawmakers and former ministers.

11 Professor George Lodge of Harvard University (1995), for example, argues that globalization is forcing all nations to converge around the most competitive economic practices. He adds that ‘A move in the direction of the Asian competitive strategy requires a radical shift in the way Americans perceive the role of government, the purpose of business and the relationship between the two’.

12 Other sections of the Queensland National Party echoed this view and the Young Nationals went so far as to advocate flogging for minor crimes such as
evasion of taxi or bus fares (The Courier Mail, 5 July 1994: 3). The conservative Call To Australia Party, led by the Reverend Fred Nile, has demanded that government 're-introduce the tougher penalties [for law-breakers] we used to live by' (Coleman 1995).

13 The family as the basic building block of society is one of the four identified in the Shared Values document produced by the Singapore Government in 1991.

14 Goh's aggressive promotion of what 'family values' are has prompted strong local reaction, most particularly from a women's group, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE). The comment made by a local writer, Mary Lee, at a public forum possibly encapsulated the views of many of the disaffected when she contended that the government's Asian values paradigm 'seems to be the basis of its anti-women policies' (as quoted in Asiaweek 21 September 1994: 25). NMP Kanwaljit Soin also protested that Goh's speech was unfair to women and interpreted it as an apparent hardening of the government's position on the roles of men and women (STWE 10 September 1994: 1).

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Human rights, democracy and ‘Asian values’

Michael Freeman

Abstract There is a widespread belief, both in Asia and in the West, that an ‘Asian challenge’ to the idea of universal human rights on the basis of ‘Asian values’ has become an important force in international relations. However, the nature of this challenge and even its very existence are subject to much confusion. The principal source of this confusion is the lack of consensus among Asians about the character of Asian values and how they are related to human rights and democracy. Analysis of concepts such as ‘Asia’ and ‘the West’ shows that each refers to a complex cultural reality. Almost all those values said to be ‘Asian’ are similar to conservative Western values, and all the questions about the relations between human rights and other values that have been said to arise from the distinct nature of Asian cultures have been, and are still being, debated in the West. Human rights are general principles that have to be interpreted in the light of the world’s diverse cultures. The most important question is who should be permitted to participate in this process of interpretation. In direct opposition to the common claim that the ideas of human rights and democracy represent a form of Western ‘cultural imperialism’, it is argued that only democratic procedures and the protection of fundamental human rights can ensure that the development strategies of Asian states conform to the values of Asian people. It is suggested that the debate about supposed Asian and Western values rests on false premises about the nature of values, and that a ‘cosmopolitan’ approach, that recognizes both the genuine cultural diversity and the interdependence of peoples in the contemporary world, is more likely to promote the legitimate aims of economic, social and political development.

Keywords Human rights; democracy; Asian values; universal values; cultural relativism; cosmopolitanism.

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